

THE WIDOW'S GRAVE.

by EDWARD WOOLF.

INTRODUCTION.

Our village church is truly a venerable edifice, and I experience no small gratification in paying a daily visit to this ancient relic, to gaze upon its grey and crumbling turrets, or sit beneath its low and ivy covered porch, or wander among the tombs of the mouldering dead. I fancy I am somewhat singular in that respect, for—with the exception of one solitary instance—I seldom, if ever, meet with a companion actuated by a similar propensity.

The old sexton is acquainted with my peculiar disposition, and often joins me in my rambles through the churchyard. He is familiar with every inch of ground surrounding the church, and points with a degree of pride and importance to certain mounds, covered with thick grass, and sweet scented flowers, as being the spots where he performed the first melancholy duties of his office; and often sighs whilst with sorrowful accents he alludes to the approach of that day, when his own form shall mingle with the dust of those whom he has consigned to the bosom of the cold earth.

He is a reverend old man, and his locks are silvered by the frost of age ; for seventy winters have passed over his head; yet he is hale and strong. I have conceived a pity and veneration for the old man, because I observe that he is shunned by many persons who are acquainted with his calling. Indeed a public executioner could not be treated with more contempt, or viewed with greater disgust, than this poor harmless and inoffensive creature both by the vulgar herd, and persons whose education and situation in life, should teach them to observe the respect due to honorable old age.

This kind hearted man frequently reverts to the disrespect he encounters from persons acquainted with his calling, and a tear will sometimes moisten his cold grey eye, and roll down his furrowed cheek. He has not a relation in the world to cheer him in his declining years, for Death has hurried his kindred from a life

of poverty and wretchedness, and they lie buried in that churchyard, where the old man has performed the office of sexton for the last half century.

We frequently visit the graves of his kindred. They are situated in a retired spot, rendered somewhat gloomy by certain dark cedar and yew trees, that cast a broad and deep shadow upon the green sward around; and he derives a melancholy satisfaction, from removing the weeds and briars from such spots of earth, as conceal the remains of those, whose smiles and affectionate assiduities, would have rendered his old age happy.

I believe that I am the only being to whom he is really attached, and I never approach the churchyard without beholding him leaning over the white painted palings, looking anxiously for my arrival; and no sooner does he recognise me, than a smile of satisfaction illumines his countenance, and he hastens to open the wicket, and welcome me.

There is an elm tree, beneath whose friendly shade we often sit, and hold our friendly converse. It is from beneath this tree, that I view the venerable church, and hear the deep and sombre tones of the old turret bell quiver upon the breeze, and gaze upon the green sward dotted with memorials of the dead. How calm, how tranquil is that spot of earth ! The awful stillness of death reigns there. So profound is the silence, that the very beatings of one's heart fall perceptibly upon the ear; and should this silence be interrupted, it is only by the solemn voice of the old bell, or the wind moaning through the branches of the elm trees that shade the avenue. From the crevices of the mouldering tombs the lizard creeps forth to bask in the rays of the sun; leaving his damp unwholesome cavern, concealed amidst rank weeds to inhale the pure and refreshing breeze, and the genial warmth of the atmosphere, when the white frost of winter has disappeared, and the verdant carpet of Nature, enamelled with varied colored flowers, welcomes the approaching spring.

It is during my rambles with the old man among the tombs, that he relates certain anecdotes connected with the past lives of those persons whose names, ages, and days of their deaths are recorded upon the tablets erected to their memories.

It happened during one of our rambles, that we arrived at a mound covered with long and soft grass. A plain looking tablet of inferior workmanship placed at the head of the grave, informed us of the names and ages of those who slept below.

The inscription ran as follows:

SACRED TO the MEMORY OF

MARY ANN WALTERSON,

Who departed this life, February 6th, 18—

Aged 48 years.

ALSO OF

JOSEPH HENRY WALTERSON,

Son of the above,

Who departed this life, February 5th, 18—

Aged 20 years.

Upon our arrival at this grave, the old sexton clasped his hands behind him, and contemplated the tablet with a sorrowful expression of countenance: he then sighed, and shaking his head mournfully, exclaimed,

" Alas sir! this mound conceals the remains of two persons whose sad history I am too well acquainted with; for the remembrance of that misery a fond and doting mother endured, when bereaved of her only child, who met with an untimely end, can never be obliterated from my memory. Come! let us return to the seat beneath the old elm tree, and I will relate the sad story to you for I

am well acquainted with the facts, having resided near her dwelling, when the sad catastrophe occurred."

Anxious to become a listener to his narrative, which promised to awaken much interest, I accompanied the old man back to the elm tree, where after seating ourselves upon a rustic bench, erected beneath the friendly shade of its wide spreading branches, he proceeded as follows with,

THE STORY of THE WIDOW'S GRAVE.

"I remember the time when Mrs. Walterson first arrived in this village; it was about seventeen years ago and she took up her residence with her infant son in a small white cottage, situated upon a green knoll, close to the meadows. The self-same cottage is standing there even now; but it is sadly dilapidated. The latticed casement—over which the honeysuckle and sweet briar were wont to twine their pliant arms, and shed a fragrance around—is now rusted on its hinges, and its broken panes are choked with ivy and wild vine. Its neat porch of trellis work—which had been erected by the widow's son, under her immediate superintendence—has fallen to decay. The garden is overgrown with weeds; and the white painted palings, which surrounded the cottage, have been pulled down, and destroyed by our village urchins, who have made the garden a place of rendezvous, to carry on their mischievous frolics; and you may frequently observe three or four of those curly headed little fellows swinging upon the garden gate, and listening with apparent delight to the creaking of its hinges.

"In a corner of the garden, near the rear of the cottage, is a small wooden house resembling an ark; it is the residence of "Ceasar," once the trusty house dog, and an especial favorite of Master Joseph. Sometimes a group of children may be observed, examining that wooden tenement at a distance, with looks of suspicion, not unmingled with fear; and it frequently happens, that one of those chubby little fellows—upon being urged by his companions—will advance a step or two, and whistle or chirp, in order to invite Ceasar to come forth; and then the poor animal—who rarely quits his cell, unless it be to visit the grave of his former mistress, and young master—will thrust forth his grizzly

head, and growl at his tormentors. Poor Ceasar! he will never forget his mistress, nor the master who cherished him. He is supported by the kind-hearted neighbors, and cannot be induced to quit that spot, for it was there the widow and her son used to caress him. He has visited the old church-yard regularly every day since he lost his mistress, and I believe he will continue to do so until death prevents him. Upon the death of the widow and her son, he took on sadly, and for several days refused food; and he would start off for this church-yard, and moan over the grave, and burrow up the ground. Poor fellow! it went against my heart to drive him from that spot; but I was compelled to do it, and finally to shut him out altogether; and then the faithful animal lurked round the palings, and whined for admittance: I would fain have gratified him, but, as he destroyed the mound, I thought it was best to exclude him. For days, weeks, nay for months, did he hover around this place, and take advantage of every opportunity to gain admittance: at length I ventured to gratify him, and opened the gate for him, whereupon, he bounded towards the grave, and whined and moaned as he was wont to do before. I was pleased to observe that he did not disturb the earth, and suffered him to continue there as long as he pleased. Since that time he has been a daily visitor. But to return to his mistress.

"It was a glowing afternoon in the month of August when Mrs. Walterson first arrived with her son. He was a little rosy-cheeked fellow; and his auburn ringlets fell clustering over his shoulders. I thought that Mrs. Walterson was the most beautiful creature I ever beheld. She was above the middle height, with a complexion so delicate and clear, that the small blue veins in her neck, resembled those which appear in the purest white marble and her cheeks were tinged with the blush of the rose while her dark chestnut hair, braided upon her snowy forehead, descended in luxuriant ringlets upon her shoulders. Her hazel eyes, and finely arched brows, rendered her countenance the most expressive, imagination can picture. You doubtless feel surprised, to hear an old man speak in terms glowing with the fervor of youth: If I am led away, it is only by the recollection of Mrs Walterson's worth, beauty, and rectitude of conduct.

It was understood, upon Mrs. Walterson's arrival, that she was the wife of a captain who commanded a merchant vessel of which he was part owner. He

was said to be a wealthy man, and respectably connected. It appeared that Mrs. Walterson had married him, in opposition to the wishes of her friends; and for that rash step, they had discarded her. It was in vain that Captain Walterson and his wife, solicited forgiveness from her incensed parents: their letters were returned; and once the affectionate wife—but erring daughter—ventured beneath her father's roof to crave his blessing and forgiveness: she had been spurned at, and driven from that father's presence with loud imprecations; and the servants at the hall were commanded upon pain of instant dismissal, never to admit her or the Captain beneath that roof again.

"Having thus forfeited all hope of being reinstated to the affections of her parents, Mrs. Walterson passed her days of solitude in the white cottage which her husband had chosen for her residence.

"Captain Walterson was absent from home for the greatest part of the year, during which time, Mrs. Walterson—to relieve the monotony of her solitary life, and beguile her tedious hours—undertook the instruction of Master Joseph; and it was a delightful thing, to behold the young mother, bending over her infant son: her dark ringlets shadowing that face upturned towards her own. And the glance of intelligence from the large expressive eyes of that child, as he received instruction from her lips, or when listening to her gentle admonitions, can never be forgotten by me.

"If Mrs. Walterson possessed any one failing—and none of us are exempted from the frailties of humanity— it was a tincture of pride, approaching to a seeming haughtiness: probably the secluded life she led, or the remembrance of the slights she had received from her family, might have wrought some change upon her sensitive mind. God forgive me, if in thought I wrong the poor widow!—but I have often imagined, that, had she been more familiar with her humble neighbors in her prosperity, nay, even in her poverty, many hours of wretchedness would have been spared her; but, notwithstanding all the misery and distress that fell heavily upon her, after the death of her husband, she still retained her wonted pride, so, that her neighbors—who were really anxious to relieve her wants—were fearful of meeting with a repulse.

"I have already stated, that Captain Walterson was absent from home for the greatest part of the year; and when he returned from sea, his wife appeared an altered creature—for she was then all life and gaiety; and I have seen her leaning upon his arm, whilst walking round the neat little garden attached to the cottage, and smiling upon him with looks of affection. And oft did it gladden my heart, to behold the Captain fondling his little son, or contributing to his amusement, by joining him in his youthful sports. Ah, sir! if there was ever an affectionate husband, and doting father, Captain Walterson was that man.

"I shall now pass over the events of about twelve or fourteen years, in order to narrate a sad domestic affliction that befell Mrs. Waterson. Intelligence arrived— and alas! it was but too well confirmed—that Captain Walterson's vessel had foundered at sea, and every soul on board had perished. It was truly grievous to behold poor Miss Walterson when she first received the dreadful tidings. It was known in the village, and many an anxious eye was directed toward the cottage.

"I was in the habit of paying a daily visit to the cottage, where I used to trim the garden, and keep the fences in order, and was frequently invited by the old house-keeper to enter and take refreshment. It happened on the same afternoon that Mrs. Walterson had received the dreadful intelligence, I was partaking of my usual refreshment, and had an opportunity of seeing her, and never, no never shall I forget her as she then appeared!

"She was seated in the parlor; the letter containing the afflicting intelligence had fallen from her hand; her eyes were upraised to Heaven—but not a tear flowed to relieve the deep anguish that assailed her heart. Her face was pale as marble; her lips trembled, and there appeared an expression of vacancy in her countenance painful to behold. Master Joseph, (who was then about seventeen or eighteen years of age, and a fine tall youth) clasped her right hand, whilst he endeavored to cheer her with words of comfort; and he imprinted a kiss upon her cold white forehead; but she heard him not, nor felt his tear of affection bedew her pallid cheek.

"The appearance of Master Joseph—for his age— was manly, and noble in the extreme. His countenance was handsome and expressive, and bore a great resemblance to that of his mother's. His eyes were black, piercing, and brilliant. His fine black and glossy hair, hung in small ringlets upon his shoulders; his limbs were firm, and well set, and gave evident tokens of a superior strength to be developed in riper years.

"It was many weeks before Mrs. Walterson recovered the shock inflicted upon her sensitive nature, by the disastrous occurrence already mentioned; and when she appeared abroad, leaning upon the arm of her son, it was difficult to recognize her for the same person. The bloom of health had deserted her cheek; her eyes were sunken, and her lips bloodless, and traces of care and anxiety became more visible upon her countenance every day I beheld her.

"It happened, unfortunately, that Captain Walterson's vessel was not insured; and, as he had devoted a great portion of capital to the purchasing of a valuable freight, but little remained for the support of Mrs. Walterson and Master Joseph, who had never been put to any trade, or profession. However, by a prudent management of the proceeds, arising from the disposal of her stock of jewelry, Mrs. Walterson was enabled to invest a sum in the funds, the interest of which, tended to support her and her son, so, that they had nothing to apprehend from the miseries attending absolute poverty; and, as Captain Walterson had purchased the White Cottage, they were in the possession of a comfortable residence.

"I have already stated, that Master Joseph was the idol of his parents; but alas! in their fondness, they had neglected to instill into his youthful mind, those precepts of morality, which are so essential for our ultimate happiness through life. By their excessive indulgence, he had been taught to imagine that he could do no wrong; and as his education had been neglected, his mind was not prepared to resist the false impressions of those allurements, with which vice so often entangles her victims; and, although his behavior for the two years succeeding his father's untimely death, was all that his fond mother could wish, and such as to merit the admiration of the whole village—yet, at the end of that time, a perceptible change was observed in his conduct, which caused the

Widow to experience some uneasiness. At first she attributed his irregularities to that eccentricity which so often accompanies youth; but, as his misconduct daily became more apparent, she began to have some misgivings as to his sense of propriety, and regretted—alas! when too late, that her excessive fondness had been instrumental in causing him to swerve from the paths of duty, and of virtue.

"His disposition—which hitherto had been characterised as gentle and loving in the extreme, was now morose and sullen. He would return from his daily rambles with a flushed brow and a frowning aspect, and sit for hours in a thoughtful mood. In vain did his fond mother endeavor to elicit from him the cause of this change in his behavior; to her enquiries he was stubborn and silent,—nay, he often exhibited a degree of petulance approaching to anger; yet her tears and gentle admonitions sometimes prevailed, and he would throw himself upon her bosom, and weep; but to all her remonstrances and entreaties appertaining to the perceptible change in his behavior, he preserved an obstinate taciturnity, and whilst the fond mother's heart was torn with anguish, that of the erring son was daily becoming hardened, and insensible to all those humane feelings, which are implanted in our bosoms by the hands of Virtue.

"I have previously stated, that Mrs. Walterson was thought to possess a proud disposition; it might not have been so; at any rate she did not seek the advice and friendship of our village dames; on the contrary, she seemed inclined to shun them. Now I do believe, that had she imparted the cause of her grief to them, they would have afforded her much consolation, and proper council to reclaim her son; but those who really sympathised with her, and were anxious to lessen the weight of her afflictions, became fearful of incurring her displeasure, and she was doomed to undergo all those miseries which the misconduct of her son was daily bringing upon her, without that friendly advice, of which she might avail herself. Indeed my good dame frequently opportuned me to allow her to visit the widow, for the purpose of consoling her; but I was apprehensive that such a visit would be deemed impertinent and obtrusive by Mrs. Walterson.

"The misconduct of Master Joseph, at length began to excite alarming suspicions in the mind of the widow. He was frequently absent from home two or three nights in the week, and his distracted mother knew not where to seek him. Many, aye, many a night, have I beheld that poor widow standing by the gate of the cottage, watching the return of her son; and every distant footstep would cause her to start, and look eagerly forward for his approach. Often have I heard her sob and moan in that gloom and solitude, until I thought her heart would break. Sometimes I have seen her, by the faint light of a candle, traversing her chamber, and weeping sadly. Alas, poor widow! callous indeed must that heart have been, that did not throb with pity for misery like thine.

" I will relate an occurrence I witnessed; it may tend to impress you with sympathy for the sufferings of a mother so devotedly attached to an unworthy son—It was on a gloomy and chilly night in the month of November, that the widow had stationed herself as usual at the gate, to watch for the arrival of her son. The dark clouds were driven swiftly onward by a sharp north wind, that howled and whistled through the leafless branches of the trees, whilst the slanting rain mixed with hail, descended with great impetuosity. The widow was muffled up in a shawl and bonnet, looking anxiously toward the high road for the arrival of her son. Unmindful of the cutting rain, and sharp chilling wind, there she stood amidst the rude elements by which she was assailed. It was indeed a pitiless night! I heard the old gates slam to and fro by the violence of the wind, and creak upon their hinges; and the foaming torrent of the swollen brook lashed to fury, rush madly onward: yet there she stood, looking earnestly toward the road by which her son usually returned home. The faithful Ceasar stood by his mistress, eyeing her wistfully, and bounding forward when a footstep was heard; but when he discovered it did not proceed from Master Joseph, he returned to his mistress and whined piteously.

"Long did the anxious widow continue upon that spot, drenched with the rain, and chilled by the northern blast: she heeded them not. What were the assaults of storm or tempest, compared to the anguish, that lacerated her bosom for the absence of her son. At length a footstep was heard, and Ceasar bounded forward—his bark of recognition and joy proclaimed the approach of his young master—nearer and nearer came the footsteps, and Master Joseph

was at length discerned through the gloom, walking with an unsteady gait toward his home. The fond mother uttered a cry of joy, and rushed forward to meet and embrace her son. Oh, God! never shall I forget the scene that followed, and would that I had never witnessed it, the remembrance even now causes me to shudder; for, when the widow rushed forward with outstretched arms to embrace that loved son who had caused her to experience so many hours of anguish—he threw her rudely from him, and with such force that she was dashed to the ground in a state of insensibility. I ran from my cottage, from the window of which I beheld this scene, and hastening to the spot where she had fallen, raised her in my arms, and bore her to her residence, into which her cruel son had already entered, and I placed her gently on a chair, when she soon recovered, and beholding her son—who was seated in an arm-chair, gazing upon her with a countenance expressive of stupor and astonishment, for he was evidently inebriated—she clasped her hands, and whilst the tears gushed from her eyes, exclaimed,

"Oh, Joseph! it was cruel of you to treat me with such harshness. If you but knew how miserable I have been during your absence, and the anxiety I felt for your safety, you would indeed pity me—but thank heaven, you have returned, and I am happy!"

"Her son made no reply, but stretched forth his legs, thrust his hands into his pockets, and regarded the widow and myself with a vacant stare. Good God! what an alteration had a few weeks of intemperance wrought upon him! His hair that was wont to curl luxuriantly, was now dishevelled and matted: his eyes had lost their brilliancy: his cheeks were hollow and sunken, and his lips black and parched from the effects of habitual intoxication. His dress was disordered, and bespattered with mire, and in fact, his whole appearance calculated to raise emotions of loathing and disgust in the bosom of the spectator. Ah, sir! it seems but an occurrence of yesterday, that I beheld the widow in her faded mourning dress; her dark glossy hair parted into plain bands on each side of her white forehead, whilst she leaned upon the arm of her son, whose eyes beamed with affection, and whose deportment, as he walked up yon shaded avenue, bespoke the pride and joy of his heart, in being thus chosen the protector of his fond mother in her declining years. And many

were the blessings bestowed upon that son as he entered the church on the Sabbath day, supporting his mother, and bearing a small clasp bible in his hand. The village dames smiled, and nodded to each other with looks of admiration upon beholding them walk up the aisle; and the old squire of the manor would often greet them with friendly salutation as they advanced, and point them out to his lady, as though he experienced a gratification on viewing the calm and happy countenance of the mother, and commendable bearing of the son; little did I then imagine, that he would become so disobedient and wayward a youth—but to proceed with my sad narrative; and it will soon be concluded.

"A discovery was made that Master Joseph had joined a set of dissolute companions, who had by the most artful stratagems lured him to their toils, and by degrees had induced him to assist them in all their evil practices. From the vices of gambling and inebriety, he had been led to commit the crime of theft, for, at the instigation of his wicked companions, he had broken open a bureau belonging to his mother, and stolen from thence a sum of money together with a quantity of plate, and some few jewels, with which he had absconded ; nor could the poor widow gain any intelligence of him, until that sad adventure occurred, by which he met with an untimely end. It happened in the following manner:

"Those dissolute companions whom Master Joseph had joined, were known as a most desperate gang of ruffians. Orchards and hen-roosts had been robbed with impunity, for these depredators were said to be so strong in numbers, and so determined, that the villagers were afraid to attack them; so, whilst rewards were offered for their apprehension, they committed the most flagrant and daring acts of robbery unmolested; and perceiving that no person ventured to attack them whilst pursuing their lawless deeds, they had become bold, and had now concerted a plan to rob the manor house, at the earliest and most favorable opportunity that should offer, in order to obtain the rich service of plate and jewels which the mansion was said to contain. For the purpose of carrying this plan into execution, enquiries were made by certain members of the gang, and it was ascertained, that the squire had gone to his town residence, in order to spend the winter there, and had left the manor house to the care of the old steward, who, with his wife, son and a servant girl, were the

only persons that inhabited it. This information inspired the desperadoes with great joy, and a determination to effect their object without loss of time.

"It was a dark and gusty night in the month of February, that the burglars set out upon their expedition; and Master Joseph, who had been elected a sort of chief or captain over this desperate gang, undertook to conduct the enterprise.

"It was about two o'clock in the morning when they arrived at the gate of the manor house, and a trusty spy was sent forward to reconnoitre, who soon returned, and reported that everything was favorable for their plan of attack: thereupon the gang forced the gate, and moving along noiseless and upon tiptoe, concealed by the thick glooms that shrouded the earth, they proceeded along the path that led to the principal entrance; and when they arrived there, Master Joseph beckoned to one of his companions, who carried a small canvass bag, containing implements for house-breaking, and taking from thence a centre-bit, a screw-driver, and a pick-lock, he commenced operations upon the shutter, whilst his companions prepared their weapons of defence, in case of an attack. Master Joseph having cut a hole in the shutter, large enough for him to thrust his arm into, reared to procure the dark lantern, held by one of his companions, in order to direct him where to find the bolt. At that moment a window of the upper story was thrown suddenly open, and a blunderbuss discharged upon the burglars. A cry of agony was heard, followed by oaths, and execrations, when the discharge of another deadly weapon from the same unseen hands, caused the gang to disperse with precipitation, for numerous lights appeared at the distance, hurrying towards the scene of action, where a great number of villagers soon arrived bearing lanterns, and weapons of defence. They proceeded to the manor house, at the door of which they discovered a man laying prostrate upon his face. They turned him upon his back, and the red glare of light emitted from the lanterns, discovered Master Joseph pierced near the heart with a bullet. Life was not quite extinct, for upon raising him in their arms, he said with a faint voice—'I am guilty—my mother!'—and so expired.

"Oh! never shall I forget the day, when the lifeless body of that unfortunate boy was brought to the dwelling of the poor widow, or the shriek of anguish that

burst from her bosom, when she beheld the pallid form of her son, who, notwithstanding his vices, and the cruel treatment she had received from him, was still dear to her heart. Poor widow! she was now indeed desolate, for, whilst he lived, she cherished the hope that he might be reclaimed to virtue and honor, and become the solace of her old age; but now that he was dead, what charms had life for her? She clung to the body, and kissed its cold lips: then gazed upon its rigid features, whilst she smoothed the matted hair from its cold forehead, bedewing it with her scalding tears. She spoke to it with the most endearing expressions, and pressed her lips to its mouth, as though her warm breath might recall it to life. We endeavored to force her from the body, but in vain, for she clung to it with a power of grasp, that defied our exertions: and continued to weep over it for some hours, refusing the consolation we offered. At length she became exhausted, and fell upon the body of her son in a state of insensibility. After she had remained in that apparent situation for a few moments, we ventured to remove her gently; but alas!—we found her dead. A small stream of black gore issued from her mouth, dappling the bosom of her son."

Here the old sexton's voice faltered, and became almost inaudible, and he turned away his head and wept. Shall I be accused of weakness, when I confess, that my eyes became dim with the tears of sympathy?

"She was buried," resumed the old sexton, drawing his hand across his eyes—"on the following day, beneath that mound, and the tablet over her grave was erected by the Squire of the Manor, who, with his good dame, often pays a visit to that spot of earth, to drop a tear of sorrow to her memory."

The old sexton having concluded his narrative, I arose, and pressing his hand with silent emotion, took my departure from the village churchyard: and I intend to visit it frequently, in order that I may gaze in silence, and in solitude, upon The Widow's Grave.